Confronting the Blood-Stained Face of History
Removing the Log from Our Eyes

Mark Chmiel

The author challenges the moral stance of being a silent bystander when U.S. foreign policy or that of any government allows or supports oppression or repression. A thoughtful consideration of three areas of the world where great suffering has occurred calls for a broader commitment to active opposition.

Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has spent almost the last five decades trying to reckon with the Nazi genocide that attempted to eradicate the Jewish people from Europe. A storyteller eventually propelled to international prominence, Wiesel has tried to impress upon fellow citizens the need to remember the Holocaust and to come to the aid of victims today. While scholars and commentators often focus on the terrifying evil committed by the Nazis, Wiesel has called attention to the role of the bystander: “I am obsessed with silence because of the silence of the world. I do not understand why the world was silent when we needed its outcry. I always come back to that problem. Where were the humanists, the leaders, the liberals, the spokesmen for mankind? The victims needed them. If they had spoken up, the slaughterer would not have succeeded in his task” (Wiesel 1985, 110). Some commentators have expressed doubt that, because of the radical evil represented by Nazism, no “lessons” can be taken away from a confrontation with that dire period of recent history (Novick, 239–63).

Nevertheless, in his 1986 Nobel lecture, Wiesel identified one demanding, exacting lesson for those who have been chastened by encountering the Holocaust: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant” (Wiesel 1990, 233).

For men and women involved in ministry, Wiesel’s is a sobering challenge. Taking sides is conflictual; national sensitivities are often capable of neutralizing a critical conscience. But today’s victims need our practical help, not simply our prayers. What are we to do? Shortly after the vicious terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, President George Bush wondered how anyone could hate the United States. He soon set about to rid the world of “evil-doers,” beginning in Afghanistan and moving on to Iraq. It is not surprising that the president has such a clear vision of American rectitude and the evil of others. His certitude offers reassurance to a wounded American population. Yet, in light of Wiesel’s call for “interference,” it may be worth recalling the saying from Matthew’s Gospel about removing the log from one’s own eye (Matt 7:5). Thus, while it may offer some temporary comfort to focus on the evils perpetrated by others, like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, we ought to be willing to consider our own propensity for arrogance, violence, and deceit. This consideration certainly applies to the Catholic Church, and recently scholars like Garry Wills and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen have unflinchingly examined the historical record of the Church. But Jesus’ dictum also applies to the United States government and the conduct of its foreign policy. In this article, I call attention to three recent areas in which this policy has contributed to horrendous human suffering, because national interests were deemed superior to human dignity. I will also call attention to some of those men and women who resisted the temptation of silence and took sides with our victims and the victims of our allies.

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An Expendable People: Mass Death in East Timor

In 1978 President Jimmy Carter decided to promote a national memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. On the first nationally proclaimed Day of Remembrance in April 1979, the president gave a rationale for this memorial
effort: “[B]ecause we are a humane people, concerned with the human rights of all peoples, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future” (Young, 336). Carter had appointed Elie Wiesel as the chairman of his presidential commission to offer recommendations on how best to remember the Holocaust in the United States. Later that year, the Commission presented its proposals to President Carter for consideration on how to proceed. One of the proposals urged the creation of a Committee on Conscience made up of respected individuals who would act as a monitoring group to mobilize their fellow citizens in defense of human rights wherever and whenever such abuses could be detected. Nevertheless, as journalist Judith Miller pointed out, the U.S. State Department and Carter Administration opposed the formation of such a committee, as “neither favored the establishment of an officially sanctioned, private group of human-rights busybodies who might offer competing assessments of various international human-rights crises and the efficacy of the U.S. government’s efforts to resolve them” (Miller, 227).

At the very time Carter initiated the project to remember a genocide of thirty-five years earlier, his administration was continuing its steadfast support of its ally Indonesia, which was then engaging in a near-genocidal assault on the people of East Timor (Chomsky 1982, 339–40). The Indonesian government had invaded and annexed East Timor, the former Portuguese colony, in 1975–1976 and engaged in full-scale aggression to “pacify” the indigenous population. Church and human rights groups estimated that 200,000 out of a pre-invasion population of 615,000 died from the mass killings and famine.

On Western military aid to Indonesia, John G. Taylor observed that “[w]hether they were F-11 jets, A-4 bombers or Bronco OV-10 from the United States or Hawk ground-attack planes from Britain, they all met particular military needs at specific moments in the campaign. The encirclement and annihilation operation required saturation bombing, hence the A-4 and the Hawk, both supplied in 1978” (Taylor, 175).

At the rhetorical level, the Carter Administration wanted to remember the evils of the Nazi period to prevent “such enormities from occurring.” At the operative level of policy, though, the U.S. continued to support Indonesian General Suharto militarily, diplomatically, and ideologically (Chomsky 1982, 339–40).

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Throughout these many years of starvation, mass killing, and international isolation, Bishop Carlos Belo spoke out on behalf of his people and offered them the resources of the Catholic Church. Similar to Oscar Romero in El Salvador, Bishop Belo became the moral leader of his people and, for his tireless efforts, received numerous death threats over the years for his defense of his terrorized people. Constancio Pinto, a young leader in the East Timorese resistance movement to Indonesia’s illegal invasion, affirmed:

The Church is the only East Timorese institution that is outspoken about the atrocities committed by the Indonesian army in East Timor. The East Timorese put their hope and trust in the Church. It’s the only institution that we can complain to about our suffering. The Church has made the resistance even stronger. It gives inspiration to the East Timorese to continue to resist and fight (Pinto, 238).

In 1996 Bishop Belo was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In making the announcement, the Nobel Committee stated: “Carlos Belo, bishop of East Timor, has been the foremost representative of the people of East Timor. At the risk of his own life, he has tried to protect his people from infringements by those in power” (Kohen, 222). The year 1999 witnessed the referendum for the East Timorese to decide between national independence from Indonesia or integration with the occupier. Over 80 percent of the East Timorese voted for independence, and Indonesian militias went on an even greater rampage than earlier in the year, causing great destruction, death, and dislocation. While the United States government had expressed outrage at Slobodan Milosevic’s treatment of the Kosovars in the spring of 1999, the Clinton Administration essentially did nothing to protect the East Timorese in the last paroxysm of Indonesian atrocities (Chomsky 2000, 75–76).

Grass-roots American efforts to offer solidarity to the East Timorese people only began in earnest in 1992, seventeen years after the Indonesian invasion. In late 1991 the Indonesian military massacred well over 250 people at a commemoration at the Santa Cruz cemetery in the capital city of Dili. This growing movement included commemorations of the dead, gathering of material aid, Congressional lobbying, and protests of U.S. government training of Indonesian soldiers and arms sales. Solidarity with the East Timorese continues as the people rebuild their lives after enduring one of the worst outbreaks of violence and oppression in recent decades.

**A School for Terrorists: Interfering with Crucifixion**

German theologian Johann Baptist Metz has argued that Christianity ought to be based on the dangerous memory of Jesus. If his followers took this...
memory seriously, the results could prove disruptive to the status quo in the present era. Metz believes that this “memory of suffering . . . brings a new moral imagination into political life, a new vision of others’ suffering that should mature into a generous, uncalculating partisanship on behalf of the weak and unrepresented” (Metz and Moltmann, 15). A contemporary example of incorporating dangerous remembrance into ritual is the recent addition to the American Christian calendar of events that pertain to the Central American martyrs. The dates of these rituals include March 24 (the assassination of El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero), November 16 (the murder of six El Salvadoran Jesuit intellectuals, their housekeeper, and her daughter), and December 2 (the rape and murder of U.S. missionaries Maura Clark, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan). These gatherings typically include dramatic readings from the martyrs as well as testimonies from those who knew them and worked with them (Mulligan, 39–66). Margaret Swedish identified a central motivation in such commemorations: “Romero’s memory, incarnated in the poor of El Salvador and all of Latin America, is a call to us and an invitation to join the poor on this faith journey, to be converted, to accompany them as they struggle for the fulfillment of their hope” (Swedish, 1995).

The rituals on such dates remind participants of the formative events of persecution of the Central American church since the late 1970s. Moreover, given the predominant role of the U.S. government in sponsoring and funding this persecution by aiding the military governments of El Salvador and Guatemala, U.S. Christians resolve to offer continued engagement with Christians in Central America.

It should be noted, however, that these few men and women who are being celebrated are but the famous symbols of the tens of thousands who were slaughtered in recent decades. And by these commemorations and commitment, Christians are attempting to respond to the challenge posed by Jesuit Fr. Jose Maria Tojeira in the aftermath of the Jesuit murders in 1989: “The developed world’s solidarity will not be authentic as long as it is limited to supporting us, the Jesuits, . . . while alienation, poverty and injustice continue to batter the disenfranchised” (Chomsky 1993, 71). Indeed, it is a telling commentary on our moral culture that these social sins rarely rouse our indignation and constructive response. For many, murder of Jesuit intellectuals is intolerable; death from hunger is not.

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria once offered a spiritual exercise for the present age of atrocity that called people of good will to struggle so that others can experience a more abundant life:
I want you to set your eyes and your hearts on these people who are suffering so much—some from poverty and hunger, others from oppression and repression. Then (since I am a Jesuit), standing before this people thus crucified you must repeat St. Ignatius’ examination from the first week of the Spiritual Exercises. Ask yourselves: What have I done to crucify them? What do I do to uncrucify them? What must I do for this people to rise again? (Sobrino, 262–63)

Indeed, in recent years many American Catholics and others have asked themselves Ellacuria’s questions. In formulating their response, they have refused to be complicit in the atrocities sanctioned by U.S. foreign policy and chosen to participate in the grass-roots effort to close the U.S. Army “School of Assassins” at Fort Benning, Georgia. Formerly known as the School of the Americas and recently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security and Cooperation, this institution has trained Latin American military officers and soldiers in techniques of torture, assassination, and terrorism; some of its graduates have been found responsible for the murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Salvadoran Jesuit intellectuals, and four U.S. missionaries mentioned above (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 7). Founded by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the School of Americas Watch has combined lobbying pressure on Congress, public education, fasting, nonviolent civil disobedience, and liturgical commemorations of the Latin American victims and martyrs, this movement to shut down this school has confronted the Army and government’s righteous propaganda with the appalling record of the school’s graduates and has undermined claims that the school promotes democracy and human rights. In recent years, thousands of Americans—Catholic nuns, senior citizens, college students, unionists, indigenous peoples, and ministers—have held vigils and demonstrated on the anniversary of the Jesuits’ murder. For example, over eleven thousand people arrived at Fort Benning in November 1999 for a peaceful demonstration in support of closing the School. Over four thousand people risked arrest as they “crossed the line” into Fort Benning to indicate their resolve that such carnage not be committed in the name of American citizens. Repeat offenders of such civil disobedience have spent many months in federal prisons for their willingness to speak the truth about U.S. support for some of the worst human rights violators in this hemisphere.

Sanctions on Iraq: When Did We See You Hungry?

Since the terrorist attacks in September 2001 many Americans have become alert to religious and political fanaticism. While the evils of hatred and intolerance are quite real, there may be other evils worth attending to that do not
involve frightening outbursts of murderous hatred. It is the case that much avoidable human suffering takes place not because of fanaticism but because of the predictable consequences of rational policies devised and carried out by individuals devoted to the aims of their corporations, organizations, and governments. One glaring example is the case of Iraq and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children who have died as a result of U.S.-U.N.-backed sanctions since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The U.S. government had supported Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980s, even when he was gassing Kurds in 1988. But when Hussein dared to invade Kuwait in August 1990, he became a veritable demon and was characterized by the U.S. media as a successor to Hitler. After the U.S.-led Gulf War pulverized Iraq, the U.S. insisted on keeping economic sanctions that have severely weakened Iraqi civil society and done nothing to dislodge Hussein from power. Approximately five thousand children died each month as a result of these sanctions. When challenged about this suffering of the innocent Iraqis on a national television program, Secretary of State Madeline Albright noted that the policy “was a very hard choice.” Nevertheless, she went on to affirm, “but the price—we think the price is worth it” (Kelly, 145).

Other people, though, have a different perspective than Albright, including Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponek, both of whom headed up the U.N. humanitarian aid program for Iraq. Their first-hand observation of the devastating consequences of the U.N. sanctions appalled them, leading them to resign their positions in disgust. Halliday took to using the term genocide to describe what was happening. An interviewer wondered about its validity in the Iraq context, to which Halliday responded as follows:

It certainly is a valid word in my view when you have a situation where we see thousands of deaths per month, a possible total of 1 million to 1.5 million over the last nine years. If that is not genocide, then I don’t know what is.

There’s no better word I can think of. Genocide is taking place right now, every day, in Iraq’s cities. To say it’s a passive thing is not correct. It’s an active policy of continuing sanctions. The member states know full well what they’re doing and what the impact is. To hide behind Saddam Hussein is a cop-out. It’s not acceptable to me. We have got to take responsibility, we the Europeans, the North Americans, the members of the Security Council. It’s our responsibility (Bennis and Halliday, 63).

Surely, Madeline Albright had no hatred for the Iraqi people; but hatred is not the issue here. Rather, it is a public policy that is justified by intelligent people who, in their positions of power, have more important considerations than hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, the responsibility for which can be avoided by blaming Saddam Hussein.
Some American Christians and citizens have refused to be silent while the sanctions were imposed and the Clinton Administration continued to bomb Iraq and then the Bush Administration launched an illegal invasion in the spring of 2003. Voices in the Wilderness, a faith-based group out of Chicago, has committed itself to taking medical and humanitarian supplies to Iraq in defiance of U.S. law. In fact, Kathy Kelly, one of the founders of Voices, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work trying to stop this humanitarian catastrophe. She and her companions know that children have been denied essential food and medicines, as the Iraqi infrastructure crumbles around them. Like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Kelly and others have been willing to defy the law of the land in order to be faithful to those who are suffering as a result of U.S. policy. According to Kelly, “we won’t acknowledge veto power over our taking medical supplies, medicine, and solace to fellow human beings in dire need” (Kelly, 154). In addition to traveling to Iraq and risking a long prison-sentence, these grass-roots activists have confronted U.S. officials and do educational work in schools and in their communities to put a human face on the Iraqis.

Paying Up Personally

In a meeting with Dominican monks shortly after World War II, French writer Albert Camus spoke candidly to the followers of Jesus as to what non-Christians expected of them. With his speech free from smugness, Camus wanted to know why the Pope had not spoken out in a compelling way about the persecution that had been taking place all over Europe. Camus acknowledged that some of Pope Pius XII’s supporters argued that indeed he did speak, but he responded that this speech was in “the language of encyclicals” and that the people who needed to hear it did not hear it. Camus concludes by sharing with the Dominicans a simple job description for Christians:

What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest [man or woman]. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of [men and women] resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally (Camus 1972, 71).

Mass murder in East Timor; persecution of the Church in Central America; devastating sanctions in Iraq; recall Elie Wiesel’s anguished question: “Where were the humanists, the leaders, the liberals, the spokesmen for mankind? The victims needed them.”
Bishop Belo and the East Timorese church, Fr. Roy Bourgeois and the School of the Americas Watch Movement, Catholic Worker Kathy Kelly and Voices in the Wilderness are all examples of those who have spoken out clearly and paid up personally. They have confronted the evils of military occupation, death squads, torture, and state terrorism supported by the U.S. government. They are credible witnesses to a Christianity that has cut through encyclical abstraction and stood with the victims of the United States and its Asian and Latin American allies. In the coming years, their ranks need to swell, from the conscientious participation of ordinary Catholics who try to respond to Ellacuría’s question, “What must I do for these people to rise again?”

References


